

# Three Faiths in the Land of 'Aryan' Thoughts

Suganchand Jain

**T**hree major religions originated in this ancient land of 'Aryan' thoughts. They are: the Vedic Religion, Jainism and Buddhism, all independent faiths which have influenced each other over millennia and none of which was an "offshoot" of any particular religion.

Among these, the Vedic religion and Jainism are older than Buddhism, which was founded by Shakyamuni Gautama, aka Gautama Buddha. The Buddha was younger contemporary of Mahavira, the last Tirthankara in the cycle of 24 Jinas.

In the Buddhist scripture *M a j j h i m a n i k a y a* Mahasimhanada verse 12, the Buddha himself tells his disciples of his severe ascetic

experiences when he first took to asceticism at the hands of Muni Pihitasrava, who was a follower of Lord Parshvanatha, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Jina.

Buddha narrated how he went naked, took food in his own palms, and followed various other rigorous restrictions expected of a Shramana ascetic. Buddha followed this practice for some time. However, when he felt it had become too rigorous, he gave up the Jain ascetic practice and wore saffron coloured clothes. He founded his own middle-path which came to be known as Buddhism.

Rsbha was the founder and first Tirthankara of the present time cycle called the Avasarpani kala. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan writes in 'Indian Philosophy' : "The Bhagavata Purana endorses

the view that Rsabha was the founder of Jainism. There is evidence to show that as far back as the first century BCE, there were people worshipping Rsabha Deva, the first Tirthankara of the Jains. There is no doubt that Jainism prevailed much before Jina Parshvanatha and Jina Mahavira. The Yajurveda mentions the names of three Tirthankaras-Rsabha, Ajitanatha and Aristanemi. Aristanemi was a cousin of Vasudeva Krishna.”

This country is known as Bharatavarsha after the eldest son of Rsbha called Bharata.

The concept of Ahimsa, the central Jain religious and ethical teaching, is not found in the Vedas. This has been shown by the eminent Indologist Prof. W. Norman Brown in his Tagore Memorial Lectures 1964-65 published in the book ‘Man in the Universe’. His observation deserves quoting in full:

“Though the Upanishads contain the first literary reference

to the idea of rebirth and to the notion that one’s action (karma) determines the condition of one’s future existences, and though they arrive at the point of recognition that rebirth may occur not only in human form, but in animal bodies, they tell us nothing about the precept of ahimsa, yet that precept is later associated with the belief that a soul in its wandering may inhabit both kind of forms.

Ancient Brahminical literature is conspicuously silent about ahimsa. Early Vedic texts do not even record the noun ahimsa (non-injury) nor know the ethical meaning which the noun later designates. Its first occurrence in Sanskrit literature is in the Upanishads, where it has nothing to do with transmigration. It is merely mentioned in a list of five virtues along with *tapa* (austerity), *dana* (alms-giving), *arjava* (rectitude), and *satya* (truthfulness).



Evidently, these are prized virtues. But ahimsa here stands isolated and unexplained. Nor is an explanation of ahimsa deducible from other parts of Vedic literature. The ethical concept that it embodies was entirely foreign to the thinking of early Vedic Aryans who recognised no kinship between human and animal relations. But they ate meat and offered animals in the sacrifice to gods.”

Prof. Brown concludes, “the double doctrine of ahimsa and vegetarianism has never had full and unchallenged acceptance and practice among Hindus and should not be considered to have arisen in Brahminical order. It seems more probable that it originated in a non-Brahminical

environment, was promoted in historic India by the Jains and the Buddhists, and was adopted by Brahminical Hinduism after it began to win its way in North India where Brahminical Hinduism was developed”.

It is interesting to note in this context that there is a vital connection between the concept of Ahimsa and rebirth. A belief in the doctrine of rebirth led to the idea of unity of all life and consequently, to the ethical concept of non-violence in ancient India.

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The great contribution of Jain culture to this evolution in human ethic is handsomely recognised by Dr. Albert Schweitzer when he says, "The laying down of the commandments not to kill and not to damage is one of the greatest events in the spiritual history of mankind.

Starting from its principle founded in world and life denial of abstention from action, ancient Indian thought, and this is a period when in other respects ethics have not progressed very far, reaches the tremendous discovery that ethics know no bonds. So far as we know this is for the first time clearly expressed by Jainism".

The uniqueness of this ethical contribution is recognised by the German scholar Dr. Walther Schubring. In his celebrated classic on Jainism, 'The Doctrine of the Jains', he states "The reverence towards life by which the realm of life was so immeasurably extended, permeates the discipline of

Mahavira's order in a way no other ethical prescription does."

It must be noted, however, that Buddhism is not so particular as Jainism in its observation of ahimsa. Buddhism justifies meat eating so long as one does not kill animals for food, but purchases meat from the butcher.

Buddha advised against consuming meat when it is (1) seen (ditta) (2) heard (suta) or (3) suspected (parishankita) that an animal was killed on purpose of a monk.

But meat may be taken when it is not (1) seen, (2) heard, or (3) not suspected that an animal had been deliberately killed for the monk. The last meal Gutama Buddha had was pork at the home of Cunda, a goldsmith at Pava.

On the other hand, Jainism enshrines the principle of 'Ahimsa Paramo Dharmah' (non-violence is the supreme religion). Jains strictly observe vegetarianism. They have been the primary exponents of vegetarianism in India. Jains have taken vegetarianism to its



logical conclusion. No other religions community in India has gone so far to avoid killing any kind of organic life for the purpose of nourishment.

At the session of the U.S. Congress commemorating the 2600 birth anniversary of Lord Mahavira in April 2001, Congressman Frank Pallone observed that, "Jainism is a beautiful religion originating in India, over two

millennia ago, built on the principle of non-violence, working on the self and realisation of the multiplicity of truth through varying perspectives of life".

Albert Schweitzer has observed that, "Any religion which is not based on respect for life is not true religion." In no other religion the theory of karma in its effects of (birth and rebirth)

is so extensively and minutely discussed as in Jainism.

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thousands of years in India. They celebrate common festivals like Dipavali, Holi, Raksha Bandhan and Nava Varsha with great enthusiasm. Cows, so dear to Krishna, are very close to the hearts of Jains. Most panjarapols (animal shelters)

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in India are either run by Jains or financed by them.

A secular mindset, coupled with mutual recognition, mutual respect and the willingness to give each other space is the need of the hour. This will ensure peace in the world and the progress of humanity on a path where kindness and gentleness are the rule rather than the exception.

# Religion as Faith and as an Identity

Asghar Ali Engineer

**R**eligion arouses complex and contradictory sentiments. Theologians and religious leaders think it is a most essential part of human life and condemn those who reject it. Theologians and religious leaders maintain what they think and say is true religion and divine commands and all others must obey them unquestioningly. Anyone who raises questions or criticises them must be excommunicated in this life and will be condemned to hell wherein they will burn eternally.

Religion as such creates complex forces and problems and if it becomes powerful establishment, it assumes even graver forms and then begins the politics to control the religious establishment. The priests, theologians and religious leaders

behave as if they are politicians and legitimise their power by invoking God and persecute those who challenge their authority or understanding of religion.

It was a struggle between the church and independent thinkers that caused much conflict and ultimately many independent thinkers rejected religious doctrines and the concept of God. There were two types of revolts against religion and against religious establishment. Some independent thinkers who were studying universe, its origin and development found the church doctrines unscientific and unacceptable and hence rejected them. Many of them became atheists all.

Then persons like Martin Luther revolted against the